

# Network Neutrality Simplified

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## Intro

Over the past few years, the media attention that network neutrality once garnered has all but faded away. However, the threats to net neutrality are still very real, and these threats are putting the future of the Internet as we know it in danger. Since it is important that we don't let this issue (along with the beloved Internetz) fade away, I wanted to offer this quick, very basic primer on net neutrality, where we currently stand, and where we go from here.

## What It Is

One day in the not-so-distant future, you'll fire up your DSL connection, open your web browser (well, the browser of choice as determined by your ISP) and start browsing to be had. Your ISP, acting as a gatekeeper to the Internet, has determined which sites and services are going to be available to you. Maybe you want to catch up on the latest news and find out what's happening around the world; Fox Entertainment Group has paid a hefty sum to your ISP, making Fox News the exclusive provider of news to all subscribers of your ISP. Don't want your news delivered by Fox? Better shop around for a new ISP that has been paid off by a different news organization. Of course, there's probably only one telephone company in your area to offer DSL, and the cable Internet alternative doesn't have much better service plans either (or maybe offers much worse!). It doesn't stop at just news, but every potential service you're looking for. The search engine you use, your email provider, image/multimedia sharing community, social network, etc. will all be determined by your ISP. Or maybe your ISP has set up a tiered pricing plan, and based on how much you're willing/able to pay each month determines what you have access to (similar to cable/satellite television – the more you pay, the more channels you get). What about those private, independent, and/or personal websites (like 2600.com)? Well, those websites can't afford to pay big money to your ISP, so they'll be served to you a little more slowly. Well, that is, if your ISP decides to serve them to you at all. Sounds like a terrible vision of Internet-future, doesn't it? Well, the concept of network neutrality is what prevents this sort

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of scenario from happening.

The phrase "network neutrality" is a (relatively) new term for an old concept: no one should be able to regulate, control, or discriminate against content or traffic. The Internet user should decide what sites he or she visits, what services are used, what applications they want, and how the user is able to connect. And when I say the concept is old, I mean it predates the Internet itself, as far back as the late 1800s. The concept was applied (and federally mandated) to the telegraph service. This made it so, regardless of where a telegraph came from, who it was going to, or what its contents were, all telegraphs were sent impartially and in the order they were received. This also applies to parcel shipping services, the telephone network, and all common carriers and public utilities.

## Where We Stand

Since DSL and dialup Internet connections operate through the phone lines, they were initially subject to the federally mandated net neutrality concept that the rest of the telephone network was subject to (cable modem Internet services have, oddly enough, been exempt all along since they did not operate via the phone network). In 2005, the FCC changed the classification of DSL and Internet services connected through the phone network, effectively making these networks exempt from network neutrality. This opened the door for telecommunications companies and broadband providers to start scheming about how they can provide service to their users in a way that benefits them the most (primarily in the financial sense), but in turn negatively impacts the consumer and the function of the Internet as a whole. Not only is this sleazy, but it is a direct betrayal to these companies' obligation to the consumer.

The issue has become a highly politicized one. Since the reclassification, numerous congressional proposals to enforce network neutrality have been made, and most of them have been defeated. Meanwhile, the telecommunications lobby, cable Internet companies, and telecommunications providers in general are busy feeding misinformation to anyone who will listen. They're going so far as to set up fake "grass-roots" organizations to oppose net neutrality, such as Hands Off The Internet, <http://www.handsoff.org> and NetCompetition, <http://www.netcompetition.org>. Both of these are conveniently funded by those companies that stand to benefit/profit the most

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from a lack of neutrality, are anything but grass-roots, and serve solely to misrepresent what net neutrality is and what its proponents are trying to accomplish. Their intent is to prevent any attempt that would write network neutrality back into law, as it had been prior to 2005.

The debate rages on, and we are certainly not in the clear.

## Is This Really A Threat?

Certainly. Service providers' and the FCC's legal roles still have not been clearly defined, but already we are seeing big business taking advantage of the consumer. As a very real example, consider the fairly recent (October 2007) attempts of Comcast to prevent traffic generated by its customers through BitTorrent. This restriction was not limited to material thought to be in violation of copyright laws, but all BitTorrent traffic, including legal use. Customers were not informed of these attempts. Not only did this violate network neutrality but, without providing a means for the consumer to be aware of what to expect when purchasing services, it also subverted the notion of a free market (a free market can not regulate itself without an informed consumer – especially when they're uninformed against their will). This certainly is not the only example of an ISP abusing its power.

Not surprisingly, Comcast is one of the major, most vocal opponents of network neutrality. The company has gone so far as to (admittedly) underhandedly block members of the general public (many of whom had gathered to speak against the company) from FCC hearings regarding Comcast's actions against its users. Comcast understands what the general public wants, but is trying to make sure that the decision-makers don't hear the public voice.

## Now What?

It might be a hard battle, but it's a battle we can win. The numbers are clearly in favor of an Internet that is free and open. Here are just a few examples of what we can do to help ensure that we win the fight:

- Contact your elected officials and make sure they support legislation in favor of network neutrality, such as the "Internet Freedom Preservation Act 2008" (H.R. 5353)
- Sign petitions in order to ensure those making decisions understand public opinion on net neutrality, like the one found on the SavetheInternet.com Coalition's website,

<http://www.savetheInternet.com>

- Spread the word about network neutrality and counteract the misinformation campaigns of big business!

## Other Resources

If you'd like to learn a little more and keep yourself up-to-date on the events surrounding the network neutrality debate, here are some websites I'd recommend as a starting point:

- SavetheInternet.com Coalition, <http://www.savetheInternet.com> A coalition, in favor of network neutrality, that is not funded by any corporation, trade group, or political party.
- Open Internet Coalition, <http://www.openInternetCoalition.com> Representing consumers, grass-roots organizations, and businesses in favor of network neutrality, the Open Internet Coalition includes big names such as Google, Skype, PayPal, eBay, and more (some of those in the world of big business understand that a lack of net neutrality doesn't only hurt the consumer, but

the market as well).

- *A Guide to Net Neutrality for Google Users.* <http://www.google.com/help/netneutrality.html> Google discusses its support for network neutrality.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network\\_neutrality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_neutrality) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network\\_neutrality\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_neutrality_in_the_United_States) User-contributed/edited entries regarding the debate.
- *H.R.5353 Internet Freedom Preservation Act of 2008* on OpenCongress, <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/110-h5353/show> In-depth discussion and analysis on H.R.5353, the act in favor of network neutrality.

## Closing and Obligatory Greetz

If you weren't already familiar with the concept of network neutrality and the threats against it, then I apologize for being the bearer of bad news. The good news is that it's not too late, and we can still help shape the outcome of the battle in a way that's favorable to the future of the Internet and to us as consumers. I'll see you on the open, free, people's Internet.

Shout Outz: *bex0, rbcp, Phractal, vixen, RogueClown, Rob T Firfely, murd0c, s1acker, Altalp, nova, graphix, jenn, the phonelose forum users, and the old school UPL and f0ur0ne0ne (RIP) crew. Free nawleed!*

Spring 2009

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